Good Old Holden: A Salingerian Reading of David Foster Wallace's "Good Old Neon"

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I. Introduction

In the world of literary fiction, there are few superstar authors who grow to become icons in popular culture. This is a symptom of the medium. More likely celebrities, like film or television actors, are tied to their physical appearance as part of their craft. With authors, we read the texts they produce, only seeing them indirectly through their work. However, from time to time, some authors achieve this superstar status. Their works can permeate the societal consciousness and inspire curiosity about the person behind the words. In these special cases, the author becomes a somewhat deified figure. Often this person, accustomed to the quiet voyeurism that effective fiction demands of its author, responds adversely to this kind of notoriety. Instead of being the invisible observer of human interaction, they become the subject of their initial object: a sculptor prodded by her own model.

J. D. Salinger provides one example of literary celebrity. *The Catcher in the Rye* has emerged as the novel of a generation growing up in the aftermath of the Second World War. The public raised his status to that of a folk legend, a mysterious recluse whose stories of adolescence, grief, and social fraudulence reverberated throughout the country. Holden Caulfield became connected to John Lennon in an unforgettable tragedy. His writings infiltrated the classroom and lecture hall, overcoming broad initial bans, and the writer himself drew deeper into seclusion in sleepy Cornish, New Hampshire. His work continues to sell, cementing its place in culture with each and every printing. He actively opposed this kind of universal renown and popularity when living, giving very few interviews and rarely publishing, leading to his final 45 years of public silence. His absence leaves a hole in the world of American fiction that itself speaks as an echo. Scholars like Myles Weber even attempted a critical reading of Salinger's silence as its own text in 2005, writing that such authors, "have no right *not* to speak," and are

"helpless… to block close textual analyses of the nonexistent works" through which their devoted readers believe they communicate (Weber 121). Once a writer reaches this status in culture, all of their actions become fodder for discussion and debate. Intense interest in the author as icon inevitably leads to ad-hominem analysis that often supersedes the text itself.

David Foster Wallace inspires similar fandom. His treatment of depression, addiction, and the loneliness of modern society resonates with an entirely new generation of readers. Now writing in a world of omnipresent entertainment and global connection, Wallace deals with familiar themes superimposed on a dissimilar backdrop. His readers, too, found a deep connection to him, leading to the advent of "Wallace Studies" in universities across the country. In the preface to their 2013 collection of Wallace criticism, Marshall Boswell and Stephen Burn state that "much of the ground-clearing work on Wallace fiction has also been completed: Wallace… has been read in terms of Wittgenstein, Buber, film theory environmentalism, changing conceptions of the encyclopedic, and so on" (*Companion* x). Academics have put Wallace's texts through their paces, but interest has not stopped at the university. Bloggers and members of his devoted "howling fantods" craft in-depth analyses of his texts removed from the ivory tower. A biopic starring Jason Segal enjoyed a wide theatrical release just this past year. Wallace's premature death in 2008 only heightened public interest in him as a pop culture.

Both of these authors now are subject to posthumous publication. Wallace's final novel, *The Pale King*, was published in its unfinished state in 2011, painstakingly stitched together by longtime editor Michael Pietsch. More works may potentially emerge, but as Boswell and Burn claim, "[they] will surely be little more than adjuncts to a fictional project that is now already complete" (*Companion* x). These predictions are unlikely to keep loyal fans from waiting with baited breath. Following Salinger's recent death, a handful of works from his years of silence are

also promised to emerge in the next five years, expanding on his Glass family saga, and elaborating on the adored and reviled Holden Caulfield. The introduction of new works from an undisputedly canonical American author are guaranteed to refresh Salinger criticism and pull it into a more contemporary U. S. context, bridging the gap from the postwar years to today. This impending renewal of interest will surely make waves from English departments to bookstores all across the country, as seen in the 2015 release of Harper Lee's *Go Set a Watchman*.

Opportunities abound for placing Salinger and Wallace in critical conversation within the larger context of American literary culture, but several explicit textual connections between the two iconic authors require exploration. The weightiest example is Wallace's "Good Old Neon," which engages with various Salinger texts by employing similar tone, themes, and motifs through the voice of a brilliant narrator struggling with meaning and identity. I present a close reading of the story through a Salingerian lens, informed specifically by *The Catcher in the Rye* and the Glass family saga, using William Weigand's diagnosis of "banana fever" to sketch the archetypal Salinger hero. By mimicking Salinger's tone and alluding to scattered motifs across his fiction, the text engages both structurally and thematically with Salinger throughout his published career, presenting the reader with a protagonist who stands alongside Seymour, Buddy, and Holden. Furthermore, Wallace's movement from the postmodern world of hip detachment reflects his broader aims for a fiction that breaks through clever irony and unsentimentality to a new sincerity, manifesting in a metafictional move that mirrors Salinger's Glass family saga. Through this comparative reading, a step can be made in placing Salinger's works in conversation with authors who actively published during his period of seclusion, opening new potential avenues for dealing with his forthcoming posthumous texts. I also strongly advocate reading "Good Old Neon" as Wallace's Salinger story.

II. Intertextuality in Wallace's Fiction

Wallace's uncanny ability to command a variety of tones and voices has emerged as a defining trait, part of "that distinctive singular stamp" that sets seminal authors immediately apart ("Dostoevsky" 260n). Wallace describes this stamp as the way "you can just tell… that something is by Dickens, or Chekhov, or Woolf, or Salinger, or Coetzee, or Ozick," ("Dostoevsky" 260n). Though his own writing is shot through with a dizzying degree of self-consciousness, most of his texts manage to move beyond metafictional or postmodern traditions that can stifle an emotive human core with irony and self-awareness. Marshall Boswell and Stephen Burn observe that Wallace's texts work often by "either implicitly outlining an adroit commentary on other works, or… by explicitly functioning as a critical act" (*Companion* ix-x). Wallace flexes his literary muscles by manipulating his precursors, leading to new ideas and fictions. Rather than a straightforward tearing-down of previous texts, he engages and grapples with them. I find that "Good Old Neon" interfaces with Salinger in the way that Boswell and Burn describe. However, I will first outline several previously identified instances of this behavior. By exploring a variety of his strong influences, from modernism to metafiction, he synthesizes an empathetic reader-writer relationship, without sacrificing a sense of postmodern self-awareness.

This intertextual engagement is most apparent in his first collection of short stories, *Girl with Curious Hair*. Wallace adopts a markedly different tone with each story in the collection to engage with a variety of writers and philosophies of the time. Instead of implying that he has no voice of his own, the collection flaunts his ability to manipulate tone without sacrificing his "distinctive stamp." This tactic perhaps grew out of his undergraduate education at Amherst College, where he made money on the side by writing term papers for his peers. He notes in a

1998 interview how valuable this was as training for "writing in different voices and styles" because he would "get kicked out" if caught (Arden 96). By studying samples of his peers' writing, he could effectively dupe professors by becoming a tone chameleon. He would remember thinking, "Man, I'm really good at this… I can sound kind of like anybody" (Lipsky 166). This talent surges to the forefront in *Girl with Curious Hair*, demonstrating his ability to bounce off of other authors without sacrificing an effective narrative. Boswell and Burn show that this trope supports the collection's push that pop culture is "a regenerative means of communication between [Wallace] and his readers." In other words, these intertextualities forge a stronger empathetic relationship between the two. They do not "merely seek to call attention to the ways in which our immersion in pop culture and mediated narratives alienates us from reality," but to show how it is "our *awareness* of this immersion that alienates us" (Boswell 65-67). Wallace treads carefully around the infinite regress of awareness to write stories that connect directly with readers, in spite of, or perhaps due to, their postmodern or metaficitonal detachment. By crafting these stories with a decisively intertextual slant through the use of other author's voices and tones to place them in specific context of American literature movements, Wallace's stories reverberate throughout his local literary landscape.

For example, one commonly discussed connection concerns the titular story, "Girl With Curious Hair," and the "brat pack" novelists of 1980s "blank fiction" or minimalism, specifically his contemporaries Bret Easton Ellis and Jill Eisenstadt. Their own novels gained popularity around the release of Wallace's first, *Broom of the System* (Boswell 78). In a stark style mocking the disaffected tone of these authors, Wallace places his protagonist, an emotionless WASP type named "Sick Puppy," into a world of punkrockers, drugs, phallic hairstyles, and general distaste for modern society. He is emotionless and rich, the embodiment of the equally status-centric and

nihilistic protagonist of *American Psycho* two years prior to the latter's publication. This tone of writing seemingly belies Wallace's stated beliefs regarding what fiction and art should focus on: namely, what it is to be "a fucking human being" (McCaffrey 26). In the same interview, he claims, "fiction that isn't exploring what it means to be human today isn't good art," and if all the markers of bad writing, like two-dimensional characters and a dehumanized narrative, "is also a description of today's world, then bad writing becomes an ingenious mimesis of a bad world" (McCaffrey 26). Wallace does not subscribe to this apology for poor art and laments the "cynicism that lets readers be manipulated by bad writing" (McCaffrey 25). So why would he adopt this coarse style in his first collection of short fiction?

One strong interpretation would suggest that Wallace enacts a clinamen in "Girl With Curious Hair" to directly combat this "bad writing." This is a deliberate "swerve away from his precursor," according to Harold Bloom's theories of poetic influence, theories that Wallace playfully referred to in an endnote in *Infinite Jest* as "Professor H. Bloom's turgid studies of artistic *influenza*" (Bloom 14, *Jest* 1077, emphasis Wallace). In this case his response is not married to a single text, but rather the greater blank fiction movement of which Ellis is a member. Wallace's critique speaks through the characters' interactions. Sick Puppy is the stand-in for the hip cynic, seemingly without a reason for his emotional detachment. The punkrockers, without the luxury of Sick Puppy's affluent upbringing, question his nature. While the punkrockers "all felt as if they had nothing and would always have nothing," they choose to make this "nothing into everything" and embrace their exception from the normative social world ("Girl" 67). Their response to severe absence is more human than Puppy's to privilege. One member of the group, named Cheese, then questions why Sick Puppy, who comes from wealth and privilege, would trade his "big everything for a big nothing" ("Girl" 68). Boswell

interprets this as a direct address to Ellis and the brat pack, and I'm inclined to agree with him (Boswell 81). With this small interaction, Wallace posits his judgment on the cynical minimalist aesthetic by adopting a detached tone and disaffected character, and then critiquing this same style through his narrative. Using Cheese's inquiry to act as a clinamen, he exposes some of the weaknesses of a fiction that avoids the humanity that Wallace deems necessary to art.

It is worth noting that Wallace denies that Ellis's writing influenced "Girl." Gerald Howard, an editor of both Ellis's *Less Than Zero* and Wallace's *Girl With Curious Hair*, notes in an article for *Salon* that the titular story, "struck [him] as an obvious and expert parody of Bret Ellis' affectless tone and subject matter" ("I Know Why"). Wallace, "ever disingenuous about his influences (you could barely get him to admit he'd even read Pynchon), denied ever having read a word of Bret's work," which Howard describes as an "obvious lie." ("I Know Why"). To make matters more interesting, Wallace railed against writing that did not interest him in a 1987 interview, "especially the young fiction coming out of the East Coast that's designed to appeal to the stereotypical yuppies, with an emphasis on fashion, celebrities, and materialism" (Katovsky 6). This description specifically targets Ellis's work two years before *Girl*'s publication. A more direct attack followed in six years, when he dismissed *American Psycho* as "a sort of performative digest of late-eighties social problems, but no more than that" (McCaffery 26). He would also claim that he did not believe Ellis possessed the "kind of courage" to "ask the reader really to feel something" (McCaffery 50-51). Obviously, Wallace was not a fan, but blank fiction's influence pervades his first collection of short fiction regardless. Paradoxically, this is to be expected. Bloom writes that, "[t]he stronger the man, the larger his resentments, and the more brazen his clinamen" (Bloom 43). Wallace's resentments were demonstrably strong, and his bold response in "Girl" corroborates Bloom's theories.

By writing fiction in direct response to another author, he places his work in explicit conversation across texts. Intertextual engagement is no outlier in Wallace's fiction. In *Girl With Curious Hair* alone, Marshall Boswell identifies "Little Expressionless Animals" and "Everything is Green" as also critiquing minimalist tropes through stylistic adoption. In the same collection, Wallace grapples with the rapidly waning power of metafictional and postmodern conceits as they were increasingly co-opted by the mainstream media and academia (Boswell 70, 100). What was once revolutionary became just another forgettable trope, though postmodernism holds some of his professed influences: writers like Barth, Pynchon, DeLillo, Coover, Nabokov, and others. He fights even harder against the influence of their fiction, again misprising them to drive his own in a unique direction. Again, Bloom's words on the power of resentment ring true. His treatment of contemporaries and precursors in his first publication was nothing if not bold.

This decisive swerve against influence plays out in accordance with Bloom's theories in the closing novella, "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way." Wallace himself notes in the beginning of the book that it is "written in the margins of John Barth's 'Lost in the Funhouse'"(*Girl).* Barth's story is one of the pioneering texts of American metafiction and an enormous influence on contemporary U. S. fiction. Wallace's novella concludes *Girl with Curious Hair* by following a group of MFA creative writing students on their trip to the "[r]eunion of everyone who has ever been in a McDonald's commercial" ("Westward" 235). The students' "Professor Ambrose" who wrote the famous *Lost in the Funhouse* acts as the "fictional construct" of "the object of [Wallace's] patricide" (Boswell 105). Ambrose, the main character from "Lost in the Funhouse," stands in for Barth himself as one of Wallace's most guiding influences that he must dispel in order to break ground on his own writing. Wallace's stand-in is the central student in the novella, Mark Nechtr. He is primed to commit this act of misprison as

an architect who can "love enough to perpetuate the kind of special cruelty only real lovers can inflict" ("Westward"). Instead of a sterile metafictional approach, he must write in a way that uses the detachment in service of real emotion. He must be a "projection of the writer of literature's resuscitation," embarking on the same mission that Wallace prescribes himself in *Girl*'s broader themes (Boswell 106). In a reinterpretation, or deliberate misprising in explicit accordance with Harold Bloom's theories of poetic influence, Wallace swerves Barth's precursor text, treating "Funhouse" as "the oedipal father of his own artistic enterprise" (Boswell 103). Again, this refuses to function as a simple nod; rather it reads as an even more volatile response than "Girl with Curious Hair." By deliberately driving Barth's story towards metafiction's inevitable "armageddon" (McCaffery 30), he writes a "metafictional critique of metafiction that seeks to demolish even metafiction's own claim to imperious self-consciousness" in order to rejuvenate fiction's empathetic relationship between the author and reader (Boswell 104). Paul Giles posits, nestled within a larger paper on "Sentimental Posthumanism," that "Wallace's story suggests that Barth's notion of ironic reflexivity has become thoroughly institutionalized… and that a counternarrative that would reject such reductive commodification involves an element of emotional risk (Giles 331). He uses irony to attack the postmodern tradition that it helped create, righting the literary ship in the direction of authenticity.

In a close study of the relationship between Barth and Wallace, Charles Harris identifies Wallace's "formidable task" as writing in the vein of "poststructuralist thought" about humanity while denying the antihumanism that many assume to be married to the form (Harris 116). By using language to "create meaning and sustain human relationships" without throwing out "poststructuralist theories" and "postmodern advances in narrative technique," Wallace looks to attain "traditional ends through postmodernist means" (Harris 116). Lee Konstantinou suggests a

similar move, referring to it as "an ethos of postironic belief" wherein Wallace uses "techniques historically associated with metafiction to general forms of affect that theory held to be impossible and to relink private and public life" (Konstantinou 85). This movement toward empathy with the reader via metafictional means lies at the root of many intertextual relationships that Wallace constructs in *Girl with Curious Hair* and beyond. All ten stories in the collection are written explicitly "with a particular style of writing popular at the time," employed to "act as a provocation to new forms" (Boddy 24-25). While these connections provide a trajectory for Wallace's fiction that follows. This paper is not concerned with any of the *Girl* texts. Wallace's continuation of "achieving traditional ends through postmodernist means" shows itself in works published much further into his career. Intertextual engagement became a central piece of his distinctive stamp as he continued to lean on metafictional techniques and clinamactic reframing of influential texts as a launching pad for his fiction. Most notably, he continues to strive towards traditional ends in "Good Old Neon," with elbow-nudges to J. D. Salinger as an influential author of fiction that exemplifies what it means to be a "fucking human being" several decades prior to Wallace's first publications.

III. A Case of "Banana Fever"

This paper ties the central character in "Good Old Neon" to the archetypal Salingerian hero, as identified by the affliction of "banana fever." This concept borrows its name from Salinger's most iconic short story, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish." In a hotel room by the beach, Muriel Glass speaks to her mother on the phone regarding the well being of Seymour, her husband. Meanwhile Seymour is spending time down by the water with a young girl named Sybil Carpenter. The two go for a quick swim as Seymour tells her about the bananafish: "a very ordinary-looking fish" before swimming into a "banana hole" where they engorge themselves until they are "so fat they can't get out of the hole again" and "die" ("Bananafish" 14). During play, Sybil tells Seymour that she sees a bananafish with "six" bananas in his mouth, to which he responds by kissing her foot. Sybil runs off following their swim, leaving Seymour to return to his hotel room after an innocuously unpleasant interaction in the elevator. There he shoots himself in the head on a twin bed, just across the room from his napping wife.

This suicide addresses a common struggle throughout his fiction: the troublesome growth out of youthful innocence into conscious maturity. This growth of self-consciousness can become debilitating, either to be addressed directly or rejected outright. Specifically in *Nine Stories*, he offers vignettes of youth, only to taint them with the impending complexities of adulthood. These quiet attacks have a deep influence on the youths of the collection. They must confront the possible flaws in how they see the world, like when a drunken Eloise forces young Ramona to sleep on her imaginary friend in "Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut," or when the Comanche Club loses their fictional hero as the Chief's failing relationship colors his storytelling in "The Laughing Man." "Down at the Dinghy" consists of a conversation concerning Lionel's first experience with anti-Semitism. These short stories hold youth up on a precarious pedestal

above materialism and adulthood, built upon a foundation riddled with the inconvenient and difficult realities of adult life. *Nine Stories* captures the quiet moments before the inevitable fall, the pedestal shaking and creaking as a storm kicks up.

Salinger's characters are forced to mature into a more corrupt adult world. Motifs recur throughout, echoing this sentiment: youth are spiritually enlightened beyond worldly adults, past trauma manifests itself in the present, and intellect alienates the self, functioning similarly to deep spirituality. These motifs all point to the struggles of transitioning into adulthood. When young children first begin to develop the critical self-awareness to evaluate themselves and society around them, they lack the coping mechanisms that come from prolonged existence in the adult world. They must fight for meaning in a reality that is suddenly unfamiliar. In "This is Water," Wallace mentions the "constant, gnawing sense of having had and lost some infinite thing" as the inverse of the freedom made possible through mindfulness and discipline. Salinger's characters must fight to overcome this sense of loss and attain awareness that could someday allow them to function in society. Some characters achieve this; others fail.

William Weigand diagnoses this gnawing absence as "banana fever." He traces its poisonous effects throughout Salinger's fiction in his essay "Seventy-Eight Bananas," claiming that "[i]t is the sense of what is missing that causes the suffering" (Weigand 10). He posits that this sense of loss and absence is the driving force behind the majority of Salinger's characters:

> [a]lthough the bananafish is incapacitated by the weight of his experience, he is also afflicted with a psychological conflict between the desire to participate in and the need to withdraw from society. …The Salinger hero... is carried along in the currents of his own psyche…in a course more or less parallel to that of society,

> alternately tempted and repelled, half inclined to participate, and half inclined to withdraw from society. (Weigand 12)

Navigating these murky waters between acceptance and asceticism lends Salinger's fiction its dense undercurrent of conflict. At the immediate surface, there may appear to be no problem, or at least a simple explanation, to many of his characters' troubles. The cynical reader might posit that Holden Caulfield appears to be a spoiled kid, a trite example of teenage rebellion. Similarly, they might misread Seymour Glass as just a soldier home from war, understandably disturbed and mentally ill, unable to cope with reintegrating into daily life.

However, these cursory readings ignore the mental lives of the characters that Salinger pays close attention to crafting. In a more nuanced reading, Holden Caulfield struggles as a teenager with unresolved grief regarding his little brother's death as he is thrust into maturity and adulthood. He confronts the corruption of the young and pure by the phony adult world, but must accept this loss as part of moving beyond childhood. He learns that he must allow for a fall, symbolized by Phoebe reaching for the carousel's golden ring, to move beyond childhood. He necessarily moves beyond his initial judgments, without a definite solution to the problem of phoniness, but a more nuanced understanding of it.

Likewise, Seymour Glass is confronted twofold by an ethos that directly conflicts with how he aspires to live. He is beset upon by a general society that he struggles to participate in, due in part to his severe trauma from the war, possibly to be understood as PTSD. This trauma alienates him from the sociability integral to human nature, distancing himself from the people he comes home to. Additionally, he has spent his entire life seeking spiritual detachment, as detailed extensively in the Glass family saga. He endeavors to overcome the materialistic and ego-driven culture that pervades society, not to exist functionally within it, but rather to

transcend it altogether. Social connection, easily achievable through recreational materialism, could help him through his trauma, but Seymour's spirituality leads him to disdain the materialistic and superficial nature of such interactions. He is stuck, unable to transcend society or to use it as a social salve for his wounded psyche. When faced with this double bind, he chooses to opt out of life altogether. Wallace's fiction exists often in the cramped space created by similar double binds; this will be discussed further below. For now, it is only important to notice how these two Salingerian heroes must wade their way through the murky social world, bogged down by their own existential weight, finding mortally distinct endings on either side of acceptance and rejection.

Further in Weigand's analysis, he describes the affliction in words borrowed from Dostoyevsky in "For Esmé – with Love and Squalor": "Dear god, life is hell… Fathers and Teachers, I ponder, what is hell? I maintain it is the suffering of being unable to love" (Esmé 102). [1] Weigand identifies this moment in the short story as the "first *explicit* statement of what is wrong" with the Salingerian hero (Weigand 11). He goes on to note that his characters generally err on the side of loving "too much" while abandoning the "emotional outlet of condemnation," especially in Holden's case regarding Antolini (Weigand 11-12). While Holden's former teacher displays certain laudable qualities, like his willingness to swaddle the body of James Castle after his suicide, he also carries with him an air of perversion, "admiring" Holden's sleeping body in the middle of the night (*Catcher* 174, 192). As one of the only vaguely positive adult figures in the novel, Holden is reluctant to condemn Antolini, though his passing experience would warrant his doing so. Weigand suggests that characters with "banana fever" cannot completely judge one

1. Falling lock step in line with this, Neal mentions in passing that "the real root of my problem was not fraudulence but a basic inability to really love" (GON 165). Additionally, one of the two times that Wallace mentions Salinger within his published writing is in the previously quoted footnote in "Joseph Frank's Dostoyevsky," on page 260 when collected in *Consider the Lobster*.

way or the other; they teeter in the liminal space between black and white, desiring to truncate and simplify a complex world while knowing that this solution is not a suitable salve for their affliction.

Salinger's heroes grapple with this sickness in a variety of ways. Weigand identifies stories from his middle period, from "Uncle Wiggly" to "Franny," as stories "of the search for relief" (Weigand 10). He elaborates:

> Having evidently rejected impulsive suicide as a cure ("A Perfect Day for Bananafish") and having seen the futility of trying to forget ("Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut"), Salinger alternately considers the following remedies: sublimation in art ("The Laughing Man"), the barefaced denial of pain ("Pretty Mouth and Green My Eyes"), the love and understanding of parents ("Down at the Dinghy"), the love and understanding of children ("For Esmé" *The Catcher in the Rye*), psychiatry (*The Catcher in the Rye*), a mystic vision ("De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period"), a mystic faith ("Teddy"), and a mystic slogan ("Franny"). (Weigand 10-11)

Through this lens, Salinger's texts all offer possible cures for the common sickness shared by his characters. While Salinger's own solution perhaps involved a life of seclusion and writing for its own sake, he explores other avenues through his characters. Regardless of how characters fare at the end of their stories, the underlying problems of banana fever are never outright rectified outright. The "constant, gnawing" sensation remains an integral experience of what it means to be a human being searching for answers in the world. The sensation remains, unless the character chooses suicide as a way to escape both the illness and life simultaneously.

The concept of banana fever features prominently in Wallace's "Good Old Neon." The protagonist, Neal, grapples with the same enemies as Holden Caulfield and Seymour Glass while bearing a strange resemblance to the most pronounced aspects of both characters. Wallace writes Neal into the mold of the Salinger hero, ushering the fight against social fraudulence into a postmodern context. After attempting a vast array of potential cures, which evokes Weigand's list above, Neal finally settles on suicide to end his suffering. Beyond details of Neal's character, the story's structure mimics the Glass family saga's metafictional slant, with a narration focused through a lens that the reader initially does not know exists. There is abundant evidence that Wallace writes Neal as his own Salinger hero with abundant nods to the reclusive author's fiction. In the next section, I walk through the story, drawing connections to this affliction of banana fever in addition to allusions to a variety of other themes and motifs scattered throughout Salinger's fiction.

IV. Close Reading "Good Old Neon" through a Salingerian Lens

a.

"Good Old Neon" opens with the narrator confessing in the first person:

> My whole life I've been a fraud. I'm not exaggerating. Pretty much all I've ever done all the time is try to create a certain impression of me in other people. Mostly to be liked or admired. It's a little more complicated than that, maybe. But when you come right down to it it's to be liked, loved. Admired, approved of, applauded, whatever. You get the idea. (GON 141)

Neal's is a story of failure. He eloquently narrates his internal conflict leading up to his suicide, flatly honest and forthright the entire time. His opening words reveal the central conflict that drives him to this action as analogous to Weigand's banana fever. He both desires to participate in society and needs to withdraw from it; society simultaneously tempts and repels Neal, carrying him "along in the currents of his own psyche," nearly incapacitating him "by the weight of his own experience" (Weigand 12). These struggles completely encompass Neal, framing him as Wallace's Salinger hero, akin to Holden Caulfield and Seymour Glass. Scrutinizing Weigand's three markers sparks a Salingerian reading of Wallace's short story that quickly proves fruitful, demanding further study.

Before the digging into his symptoms, it is worth addressing the structural similarity of Wallace's introduction to Salinger's in *Catcher*. Neal's first words establish a variety of precedents at once, both characterizing the narrator/protagonist and the broader thematic aims of the implied author. This passage immediately engages the narratee, or the narrator's ideal reader, through the establishment of presumptions by the narrator on narratee. With the second sentence, Neal sets the narratee in an antagonistic role, assuming a challenging retort to the initial

statement. He expects his reader to antagonize, heading his admission of fraudulence at the pass, but Neal is a step ahead, reacting to an assumed response before his initial action. Instead of plainly stating the facts and moving on, he colors his responses to address perceived rebuttles, illustrating the humming mechanisms active in his unwritten internal monologue. The thoughts, and levels of further thinking implied, are the product of a narrator who is in possession of some serious "mental firepower" (GON 155). In this introduction, Neal expresses his desire to control the perceptions that he engenders in others, both reviling the fraudulence of presenting oneself to others and craving the admiration he admits is worthless.

This kind of nested thinking belies his conversational style and casual treatment of narration. While he falls into these pits of recursivity, he addresses the narratee with vernacular candor, establishing a one-sided rapport in the extended monologue. This aids in humanizing the narrative that seems structured to respond to the narratee's perceived challenges; instead of coming across as hideously self-pitying and apologetic, the narrator draws the reader into an exchange where only one side is doing the talking. With these two defining features, the implied author aligns this narrator with two of Salinger's most important characters.

Compare Neal's opening with Holden's first words in *Catcher*:

> If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth. (*Catcher* 1)

Again, the narrator immediately establishes the vernacular style that will pervade the text by addressing the narratee directly, bringing them into the one-sided conversation. It implies that a question was asked in an external analepsis, before the central events of the text. The mirrored

implication of the narrator forces the hand of the narratee, thrusting them into a conversational narrative concerning fraudulence, depression, and thoughts of suicide. Furthermore, this style of narration in the first person masks the thoughts the narrator chooses not to verbalize.

It is apparent that two texts begin in a structurally identical way to engage the reader. The opening words of "Good Old Neon" evoke the aforementioned Seymour Glass, the fatally emotional center of the Glass family saga. At once immensely intellectual and intensely spiritual, Seymour's relationship with life and death is a troubled one. Surviving war and attempting to return to normalcy at home, he succumbs to his own inability to connect. His suicide resonates throughout the Glass family saga, coloring the collection of narratives framed through his brother Buddy's pen. Neal also succumbs to the weight of his own mind, his first person narration allowing a clearer window into his suicidal logic than Seymour's. The latter's internal world is obfuscated by the third person narration that shrouds his actions in mystery. Seymour's portrayal becomes more complicated when reading it in context of Salinger's other work, complicating this seemingly objective third person account. In comparison to Salinger's most notable first person narrator, Holden Caulfield, Neal can expound upon the workings and motivations of his internal world more fluently. However, he is portrayed in less of an alienated light than Seymour, at least in relation to the narratee. Neal represents an amalgamation of these two characters with one foot in each text, being pushed from and pulled to the society that surrounds him.

b.

This is the first step towards a diagnosis of Weigand's banana fever: simultaneous temptation to and repulsion from society. Neal compulsively describes the internal conflict that simultaneously makes him disdain and desire acceptance from society. His best explanation comes in the excessively logical language of "the fraudulence paradox":

> The fraudulence paradox was that the more time and effort you put into trying to appear impressive or attractive to other people, the less impressive or attractive you felt inside – you were a fraud. And the more of a fraud you felt like, the harder you tried to convey an impressive or likable image of yourself so that other people wouldn't find out what a hollow, fraudulent person you really were. Logically, you would think that the moment a supposedly intelligent nineteen-year-old became aware of this paradox, he'd stop being a fraud and just settle for being himself (whatever that was) because he'd figured out that being a fraud was a vicious infinite regress that ultimately resulted in being frightened, lonely, alienated, etc. But here was the other, higher-order paradox, which didn't even have a form or name – I didn't, I couldn't. (GON 147)

Neal's conflicting desires shine through when unpacking this paradox in terms of the society's tug-of-war. He wants the people around him, from total strangers to his close family, to regard him positively. He desires control over their perception of him above all. At least, he thinks this is what he wants. However, there is nothing beyond this initial perception that could do him any good. At the same time that he attempts to engender a positive image of himself in others, he also resents the fact that he is displaying himself as someone who appears impressive or attractive. He doesn't feel like any of these things at his core, rather "frightened" and "lonely," unattractive to say the least (GON 147). His attempts to manipulate others whittle him into a more "hollow" internal state, eroding his sense of self-worth (GON 147). Neal exerts a constant pressure upon himself to be accepted and loved by society. His attempts poison the effort, even as he grows more in tune with his social climate. Isolated and alone, he imprisons himself through meditations of self-fraudulence.

The narrator seeks salvation from self-fraudulence through a variety of avenues, listing them ad-nauseum:

> EST, riding a ten-speed to Nova Scotia and back, hypnosis, cocaine, sacro-cervical chiropractic, joining a charismatic church, jogging, pro bono work for the Ad Council, meditation classes, the Masons, analysis, the Landmark Forum, the Course in Miracles, a right-brain drawing workshop, celibacy, collecting and restoring vintage Corvettes, and trying to sleep with a different girl every night for two straight months… psychoanalysis was pretty much the last thing I tried. (GON 142-3)

It is important to note that these potential salves are not work; these are activities meant to fill time and deal with the existential struggles. Salingerian heroes employ similar tactics in attempts to escape banana fever. Meditation and mysticism were addressed in "Teddy" and "De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period," drawing and art in "The Laughing Man" and "De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period," and analysis most importantly in *Catcher*. Many of these potential solutions are social acts; that is, they do not offer a reprieve from Neal's insatiable urge to create an impression of himself in others to seek approval. He is tempted and repelled to and from these solutions, stranding him in his initial state. Also, it is important to remember the final solution that remains unmentioned in this list: suicide. Salinger also put this forward as a potential solution, both in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" and in the ambiguous ending of "Teddy." The narrator clues the reader into previous attempts through analepsis, leaving the final option to take center stage, then its effectiveness evaluated in a literal postmortem.

Already in this narration, there are suggestions that this action did not cure his affliction. He continues to project a version of himself on the reader; Neal's attempt at forthrightness

remains tinged with manipulation. His own aptitude at controlling perception makes him yearn for someone who can see through his constant façade. He explains, "a corollary to the fraudulence paradox is that you simultaneously want to fool everyone you meet and yet also somehow always hope that you'll come across someone who is your match or equal and can't be fooled" (GON 155). Neal's experience of the fraudulence paradox is marked by the search for someone to equal his "mental firepower" – this ideal person, also an abstraction that lacks a place in reality, alone stands a chance at halting the recursive cycle of malicious logic. Neal is aware of how he is tempted and repelled by society, but this awareness proves insufficient to spring Neal and other Salingerian heroes from this paradox. He pins his hopes on a mythical other to burst through his manipulations that are rarely admitted, except to his analyist.

Neal tries psychoanalysis as his penultimate attempt at relief, embodied in the mustachioed Dr. Gustafson. He looks to Dr. Gustafson for firepower, but is disappointed. Neal is such a slave to social deception that he combats even his conscious effort at consistently going to psychotherapy. He recalls,

> I remember I spent maybe the first twenty times or so in analysis acting all open and candid but in reality sort of fencing with him or leading him around by the nose, basically showing him that I wasn't just another one of those patients who stumbled in with no clue what their real problem was or who were totally out of touch with the truth about themselves. When you come right down to it, I was trying to show him that I was at least as smart as he was and that there wasn't much of anything he was going to see about me that I hadn't already seen and figured out. And yet I wanted help and really was there to try to get help. (GON 146)

Neal's actions simultaneously ask for genuine engagement with society, while continuing to actively manipulate and fight his own motivations for going to analysis in the first place. This episode is the most explicit connection to the simultaneous push/pull affect that the sufferer of banana fever has in regards to society. They lack a concrete self-identity, crafting their selfhood in opposition to the outside forces of perceived phoniness, in response rather than repose. Lacking a connection to self-identity causes suffering, consistent with Weigand's diagnosis of banana fever. This struggle evokes a Salinger character who is similarly stuck in a fencing match between individuality and adult society, though he may have lost track of the foils along the way.

c.

Much like Holden Caulfield, Neal's digressive monologue often seems to be carried along by the currents of his own psyche. He drives the story's narrative forward through seemingly unimportant tangents that fill out his character without letting the reader forget what the story is about; he intermittently reminds the reader that he is, in fact, dead, explaining the suicidal act. The reminders are welcome; the short story's digressions often go on for pages without much connection to the linear plot at hand. Neal focuses on his interactions with Dr. Gustafson in his office until confronted with distasteful thoughts, generally tapping into the deep depression that Neal feels when the analyst fails to see through his deceptions.

His admitting the deceptions, much like the fraudulence paradox, does not solve the essential problem. Neal admits to Gustafson, "I seemed to be so totally self-centered and fraudulent that I experienced everything in terms of how it affected people's view of me and what I needed to do to create the impression of me I wanted them to have" (GON 145). Through this admission, it appears that Neal is able to overcome his concern with creating a sort of impression of himself in others, but he is furthermore aware of this admission's effect in itself; it

is just another layer in which he controls Gustafson's perception of him as "uniquely acute and self-aware" (GON 154). In response to the impending disappointment of the insight he knows will follow, Neal plays "a little dumb, probably, to get him to go ahead and say it" (GON 146). However, Gustafson's response does not immediately follow in the discourse of the text. The narrator disassociates from the task at hand, turning his thoughts to society, his younger sister, other attempted cures for his condition, and much more. A beefy eight pages of digression separate Neal's admission and Gustafson's question in his office, a brief "dramatic pause Dr. Gustafson allowed himself before delivering his big reduction ad absurdum argument that I couldn't be a total fraud if I had just come out and admitted my fraudulence to him just now" (GON 150). Neal drags himself and the narrative away from the disappointing moment by focusing in on the thoughts "flashing" through his head, cropping up in response to Gustafson's disappointing lack in firepower.

Neal acknowledges the paused plot with the sentence quoted above, but immediately leaps back into a digression following his admission of its clumsiness. This second digression goes on for *twelve* pages, detailing his attempts to overcome his recursive self-fraudulence and eventually landing back on the image of Dr. Gustafson, "touching and smoothing his mustache" (GON 162). Neal's emotional reactions to Gustafson in the psychoanalysis office concretely affect the mental action of the story, spinning his own narration into other directions. The disappointing interactions with Gustafson mostly manifest themselves in meditations on the paradoxes present in the fraudulence of daily life. Bracketing all of these digressions, furthermore, is his awareness of the fact that these thoughts rush forth faster than language could ever hope to keep up. These unstoppable mental flows are at the root of his struggle as a character, an endless series of brackets and recursive logic that constantly sends himself further

and further inward, propelled by his own psychoanalysis, acting both as the patient and therapist. Carried away by his unstoppable mental processes, the second marker of banana fever, he identifies another paradox:

> that many of the most important impressions and thoughts in a person's life… have so little relation to the sort of linear, one-word-after-another-word English we all communicate with each other with that it could easily take a whole lifetime just to spell out the contents of one split-second's flash of thoughts and connections, etc. – and yet we all seem to go around trying to use English… when in fact deep down everybody knows it's a charade and they're just going through the motions. What goes on inside is just too fast and huge and all interconnected for words to do more than barely sketch the outlines of at most one tiny little part of it at any given instant. (GON 150-1)

This passage exemplifies the narrator's almost helpless desire for connection with others, even if they are only a "sketch" of what is actually happening inside someone else. Even though he is aware of the infinite inaccuracies, the sketch is an attempt to connect in a meaningful way with the reader or listener. He tries to present an illustration of himself and his reasoning, fighting against the forces of self-doubt that pervade each and every one of his social interactions. The meditations on the pointlessness of language seem to emphasize the alienation that he feels when presenting himself to others, while at the same time attempting to present himself to the narratee, explaining what led to his last-ditch cure for banana fever. He does all of this in a spiraling, pinwheeling fashion, words spilling out in sprawling sentences and complicated multi-hyphenates. In both form and message, he is carried along by the currents of his own psyche, trapped under the weight of verbalizing his mental processes.

d.

In the end, he is, like the bananafish, incapacitated by the weight of his own experience. Before his end, though, Neal struggles against this weight, trying to "somehow squeeze out through one of those tiny keyholes" through which we can see into each others "whole universe" (GON 178). He is trapped inside his own banana hole, never to escape. His exhaustive attempts to explain away this existential pain evokes Holden Caulfield, though admittedly more eloquent and in touch with his internal struggles. Weigand connects Holden's role as the catcher in the rye with the experience of the bananafish:

> He wants to guard the children from falling off the edge of the rye field; likewise he tries to guard each experience from falling into oblivion. With this perspective he fails to discriminate between 'important' and 'unimportant' experiences to determine which to retain and which to reject – and the bananafish becomes the more bloated and uncomfortable. The 'perfect day' is the day when the bananafish is able to end all his suffering by killing himself. ("Seventy Eight" 8)

When applying his analysis to Neal in "Good Old Neon," the story reflects a kind of impassioned struggle against the loneliness of subjective experience. His attempt to fight the currents of his psyche and narrate through the weight of his experience is actively thwarted by his reflexive awareness. He experiences his life, and then additionally experiences it from an outside perspective, sometimes "sort of hovering above and just to the left" of himself, choosing to cast his lot with "life's drama's supposed audience instead of with the drama itself" (GON 176). The depth of his experience, itself a byproduct of his intellect, makes him too aware to act without being drowned by the potential social repercussions of his actions. He cannot stop his flow of consciousness, cannot focus only on the events and experiences that directly affect him. Instead,

experience drags him along as his intellect unveils the smallest implications of each possible action, leaving him incapacitated.

He fails to find a way out of the world of social paradoxes, enacting his final solution because he is "an essentially fraudulent person who seem[s] to lack either the character or the firepower to find a way to stop," even when aware of what he is doing (GON 173). He has no way to move forward, so he opts out altogether, much like "a lot of history's great logicians… that is a fact" (GON 167). The combination of immense intellect and logical paradoxes makes for a never-ending, impossible task of showing anyone "the infinities you can never show another soul" (GON 179). If Neal assumes that everyone else does not struggle with these issues, he is without hope and doomed to be crushed under the weight of his mind running in circles.

Surprisingly though, Neal seems to stumble upon a solution for his existential predicament. In plain language, he admits the truth about the struggle he spends the story addressing:

> Of course you're a fraud, of course what people see is never you. And of course you know this, and of course you try to manage what part they see if you know it's only a part. Who wouldn't? It's called free will, Sherlock. But at the same time it's why it feels so good to break down and cry in front of others, or to laugh, or speak in tongues, or chant in Bengali – it's not English anymore, it's not getting squeezed through any hole. (GON 179)

The heaviness of the experience has less to do with the actual experience; rather, the immense struggle lies in conveying it in language to others. How can the bananafish hope to squeeze out of its banana hole? How does one express the inability to connect or verbalize, and further, the seeming inability to express this disconnection, to one's own self? Again, the problem is

identified, but the struggle persists, as verbal expression necessarily must forfeit the nuances of direct experience. The story ends with the acceptance of the impossibility of this pursuit, compassionately terminating with, "Not another word" (GON 181).

The solution for Neal's banana fever seems to be the abandonment of language: silence. He achieves this silence through suicide, as does Seymour. Holden ends his story with a similar sentiment, moving into the world of social fraudulence with a small bit of advice for the narratee: "Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody" (*Catcher* 214). In a strange move antithetical to the art form that they are expressed through, these texts seem to suggest that "an answer" will never come from purely linguistic firepower. Stories provide no solution. However, the *telling* of the story seems to have a galvanizing effect between the narrator and the narratee, suggesting a potential avenue for dealing with existential anxiety like banana fever.

Neal's fight against the weight of depression and suicide seems valiant at points in his narration, shining through in his exhaustive effort to convey his internal world with that of the reader. In keeping with Weigand's symptomatic analysis, Neal is tempted and repelled by society, carried along by the currents of his own psyche, and eventually incapacitated by the weight of his own experience. Wallace has written a textbook Salingerian hero's struggle with suicide. The reader cannot discount the fact that Neal has been dead since the beginning of his narration. He no longer needs to try to connect or manipulate the people around him, being that he is "outside linear time and in the process of dramatic change" (GON 163). Why would he be telling this story, and how? While initially problematic, this impossible narrator provides another, structural connection between this text and Salinger's body of work. With a metafictional flourish in the final two pages, Wallace unveils "David Wallace," the unseen lens

through which the story is told. Retroactively reframed, the emotional core of the story fundamentally shifts; a condemnation of one's efforts to genuinely express anything becomes a celebration of one's necessity to try and fail, and "Good Old Neon" becomes even more beholden to Salinger.

V. "David Wallace" as "Buddy Glass": Mirrored Metafictional Moves

a.

Early on in the short story, the speaker mentions the following in passing:

> All I'm trying to do is sketch out one little part of what it was like before I died and why I at least thought I did it, so that you'll have at least some idea of why what happened afterward happened and why it had the impact it did on who this is really about. (GON 152)

Here, Wallace reveals that the short story is less about Neal than the fictionalized "David Wallace." The focus retroactively shifts from the narrator's lens to that of the author, or, more accurately, the fictionalized façade of Wallace injected into the storyworld. This shift presents a few factors to carefully parse: to confirm that "David Wallace" performs within Neal in the preceding narrative, to demarcate the specific characteristics of the fictionalized "David Wallace," and to identify the cliché that fights the authorial attempts of "David Wallace." With this metafictional turn, more connections to Salinger are illuminated and suture themselves to Wallace's story.

The story's final page presents a variety of images one after the other, in an expression of the nonlinearity of time that the narrator experiences in his state of death. At the end of this series, an image is presented of a "David Wallace… in the midst of idly scanning class photos from his 1980 Aurora West H.S. yearbook and seeing my photo and trying… to imagine what all must have happened to lead up to my death (GON 180). A previously unseen character identifies the narrator of the story up to this point in his high school yearbook, throwing the source of the story's narration into indeterminacy. At this point, the narration shifts to third person omniscient. The narrator gains the ability to see into "David Wallace's" mind and tell how this man saw

himself as a "dithering, pathetically self-conscious outline or ghost of a person" (GON 181). The narrator has been speaking from "outside linear time" in post-death existence, which is logically troublesome. Attacking this puzzle from a different perspective allows for a simpler explanation.

The story's narration is focalized through this "David Wallace." This character adopts the voice of a former classmate who committed suicide in a quest "to somehow reconcile what this luminous guy had seemed like from the outside with whatever on the interior must have driven him to kill himself" (GON 181). The words "imagine," "reconcile," and "attempt" are all used to describe what "David Wallace" is doing when looking at the picture. He is trying to complete the story, trying to tie the high schooler with his tragic end. This all occurs underneath the aching awareness "that you can't ever truly know what's going on inside somebody else" (GON 181). This cliché mocks "David Wallace's" attempts to understand and imagine Neal's logic every step of the way. The character closes the story with a response to this poisonous "inbent spiral" of logic, directed from "the realer, more enduring and sentimental part of him" saying, "Not another word" (GON 181).

With these final words, the mystery of the dead narrator is solved. The *true* narrator, the entire time, is "David Wallace". The narrating Neal is not identical to the "real life" Neal in "David Wallace's" yearbook, instead an imagining of Neal focalized through "David Wallace." It is a knowingly false portrayal of the way that this man's life may have gone, informed by "David Wallace's" own personal experiences and understanding of the world. He is aware that it is hopeless to try to see through to "the endless infinities you can never show another soul," especially not mediated through language, but he silences these concerns. Lee Konstantinou, in a study on Wallace and postironic belief, writes

> Wallace pulls away the "fourth" wall of the fictional world of his story, revealing that what the readers were led to believe was fiction (and specifically postmodern metafiction) may in fact be a kind of meta-nonfiction… [to] cause the reader to experience a form of connection with Wallace as a writer… not "Dave Wallace" the character, but the author. (Konstantinou 98)

By writing and communicating the fact that these things are hopeless to communicate, he conveys the essence of banana fever in the mind of an author, through the character-narrator's own struggle with fraudulence, depression, and suicide.

Before venturing further into the implications of the narratorial revelation, the character-narrators must be clearly distinguished. Who *is* this really about? Starting at the deepest layer, there is Neal. He is a figuration of how "David Wallace" fills in the gaps of this schoolmate before his suicide. "David Wallace" is presumably adopted, as he mentions being in his "real parents' kitchen ironing his uniform," a commonality between him and his classmate at Aurora West High School (GON 181). With this detail, the distinctions between Neal and "David Wallace" begin to dissolve. Neal is also likely adopted, clued by the reference to his "step-parents' biological daughter" who he regards as "one of the funniest people on earth" and "attractive in a sort of witchy way" (148-53). "David Wallace" mentions her as the "witchily pretty sister" of the ".418 hitter" on the final page (GON 181). Neal appears to be an amalgamation of facts from Neal's life through "David Wallace's" lens, more reflecting "David Wallace's" life than Neal's in the most consequential sense.

"David Wallace's" life is also quite distinct from that of the implied author, David Foster Wallace, not to mention the flesh-and-blood DFW. The human Wallace was born to his biological parents in New York, went to Urbana High School in Ithaca, played tennis, and had a

younger sister named Mary. Some of these descriptions fit the text's "David Wallace," while others stand in obvious distinction. The discrepancy that opens up has a bit of a comic effect. David Foster Wallace perhaps betrays a larger significance in his use of an authorial stand-in. His use here evokes a similar metaficitonal move, one made almost fifty years prior by another, more reclusive American fictionist.

b.

J. D. Salinger's "Glass Family Saga," as it is commonly referred to, acts as a binding agent for the lion's share of his fiction. The handful of short stories and novellas that take place in this universe focuses on the members of the Glass family: Seymour, Franny, Zooey, Buddy, Boo Boo, Walt, Walker, and their parents. However, the saga extends outward from just stories including members of the family. Buddy Glass, the writer of the family, confesses to writing a curious arrangement of texts in "Seymour – An Introduction." He mentions how people have responded to his previous writing, addressing questions regarding,

> whether a lot of Seymour didn't go into the young leading character of the one novel I've published… But what I can and should state is that I've written and published two short stories that were supposed to be directly about Seymour. The more recent of the two, published in 1955. ("Seymour" 90)

Buddy here cops to the fact that he wrote one novel, a confession that critics have taken to refer to *The Catcher in the Rye*, as well as the 1955 story, "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters" about Seymour's wedding day. Therefore, in Salinger's deep fiction, Buddy Glass is the author of these stories initially bearing the name J. D. Salinger, acting as an authorial alter ego or stand in. Buddy makes this more complex as he goes on, speaking about the "much shorter story…

back in the late forties" where Seymour "fired a bullet through his brain in the last paragraph" ("Seymour" 90). He acknowledges a discrepancy in the characterization of the protagonist:

> [S]everal members of my immediate… family… have gently pointed out to me… that the young man… was not Seymour at all but, oddly, someone with a striking resemblance to – alley oop, I'm afraid – myself. Which is true, I think, or true enough. (Seymour" 91)

In a reframing of a short story that was published about a decade earlier, the reader again is made aware that she was seeing the narrative through a lens she did not know existed. While "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" is not written with a first person narrator, it portrays Seymour in what was, until this illumination, a supposedly objective light. Through this revelation, the deep fiction of the universe is elaborated upon and expanded. The reader must read through "Bananafish" again with the knowledge that the Seymour in this short story is not seen as an accurate portrayal by the members of his family that knew him best, rather that he is more of a reflection on the storyteller than the storyteller's subject.

Buddy goes on to elaborate on this idea, addressing how he subconsciously entered the fictionalized portrayal of his brother:

> I can't forbear to mention that that particular story was written just a couple of months after Seymour's death, and not too very long after I myself, like both the 'Seymour' in the story and the Seymour in Real Life, had returned from the European Theater of Operations." ("Seymour" 91)

In the deep fiction of the Glass family, Buddy Glass must grapple with his brother's sudden suicide. He has just married, seemingly happy on a vacation with his beautiful wife, when he decides to shoot himself on the bed next to her. The vacation is important, mainly because Buddy

is confirmed to not be present for these events. If the narrator were not present, he could have no way of knowing the particulars of Seymour's last day, especially the interactions with the young girl, Sybil, down at the beach. This is not a problem if the narrator is omnipotent, but Buddy, as a character within the deep fiction of the Glass family, is, by his nature as a character, *not* omnipotent. While he is the family's record keeper and writer, he is just one of the members of the family, without any more access into someone's "infinities" than any other character.

The identification of the narrator as character unveils an unseen lens, necessitating a rereading of "Bananafish." With the information that "Seymour" resembles Buddy more than Seymour, the story becomes a brother's attempts to imagine his loved one's final day in the moments before he committed suicide, trying to make sense of a traumatic event. This is admittedly not based in truth, as pointed out by the family, but the attempt still resonates. The story speaks more about Buddy's desire to understand why someone chooses death as opposed to Seymour's suicide.

c.

Structurally, "Bananafish" resembles "Good Old Neon." The main character is retroactively revealed to be Buddy Glass, writing *through* Seymour to cope with Seymour's suicide. In "Good Old Neon," Neal is revealed to more accurately represent "David Wallace", who is also writing in response to the "Real Life" Neal's suicide, crafting a narrative to fill in the gaps of the man's story. In both cases, Buddy Glass and "David Wallace" assume the place of the implied author, J. D. Salinger and David Foster Wallace respectively, further casting doubt on the veracity of the narration.

Through these metafictional moves, the implied-author-as-character figure invites the reader into the troublesome process of constructing a narrative, creating an empathetic link

between the implied author and reader. This link is not unique to narratives that employ metafictional tactics; they abound in more traditional, less self-conscious narratives. Buddy Glass addresses, in a *footnote* no less, how at times an author's life can start "outliving much of his best poetry" ("Seymour" 112). Readers will often gravitate toward available biographical information to generate their own image of the implied author, inevitably a distinct figure from the flesh-and-blood author. Regardless of its accuracy, the reader's own conception of the implied author can color or even overshadow the narrative. Buddy acknowledges this, with the perspective of a writer, but without the baggage that tags along with the name "J. D. Salinger." Buddy elaborates in his footnote, speaking directly to the audience outside of the narrative at large

> [Y]oung poets beware. If you want us to remember your best poems at least as fondly as we do your Racy, Colorful Lives, it might be as well to give us one good field mouse, flushed by the heart, in every stanza. ("Seymour" 112)

Though Buddy uses a footnoting technique that emphasizes his role in the construction of the fiction, he at the same time extolls the virtue and importance of sincerity in fiction. Readers will inevitably dig into the myth of the author's life, but only a sincere and humanistic approach will be able to stick in readers' minds as much as the author's biographical exploits. Buddy gives the example that his students "undoubtedly know that Robert Burns drank and romped to excess, …but I'm equally sure they also know all about the magnificent mouse his plow turned up," as immortalized in Burns' poem, "To a Mouse" ("Seymour 112). Buddy appears to think that sincerity and humanity are among the only ways for a texts overcome the weight of the implied author's own lifetext.

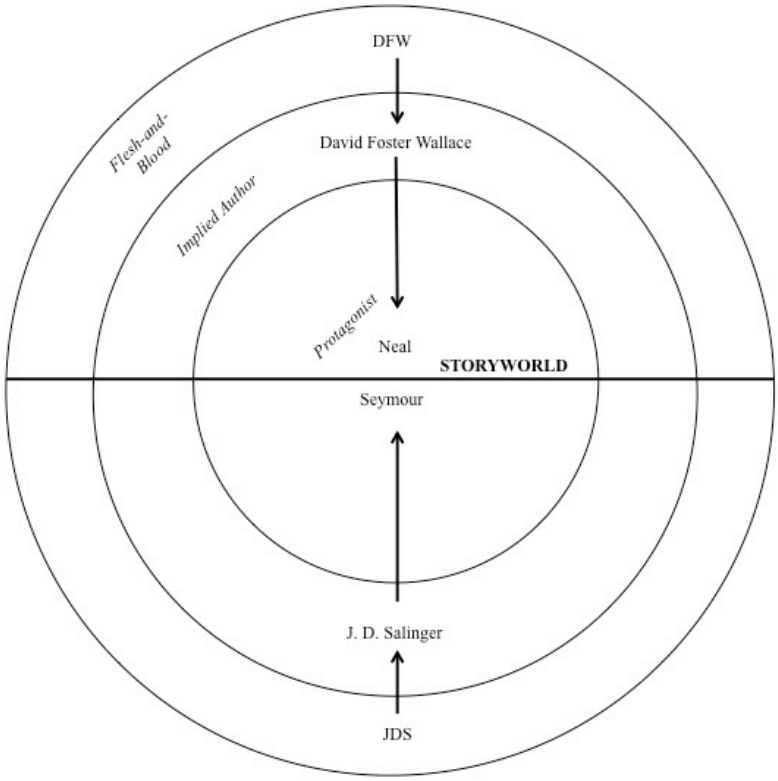
Salinger uses the distance afforded by his stand-in character-narrator to make this point. His own name, having achieved such a mythic status in pop culture carries with it a mountain of associations, so using a mouthpiece to take ownership of his previously published fiction allows him to speak in a different way. Through Buddy, he can bring light to observations about the act of writing without readers connecting them to Salinger's own biography. Though he uses a metafictional distancing between himself and the text, the overall argument that this supports is in favor of a text that engenders more of an emotional and sentimental connection with readers. By cluing the reader into the life of the writer, the text becomes less of an object than a reflection of another human being.

d.

Both authors contend with issues of fraudulence, most pronounced in *The Catcher in the Rye* and "Good Old Neon," then further compound that concern through the retroactive reframing of their narrators following the revelation of a previously unseen intermediary. The additional lens displaces the original implied author, suggesting a concern with potential fraudulence. The mediating character-narrator acknowledges potential untruths and sheds light on the story's discourse. The character-narrator cops to his own experience's influence on the crafting of the character, Neal or Seymour, in order to appear upfront and forthcoming to the reader. The acknowledgment of potential narrative concerns serves to make the narrator appear more reliable and trustworthy, allaying doubts that they are misleading the reader through transparent telling. All of this material is further bracketed by a collective understanding that this *is* fiction after all, and none of this must be true in the first place.

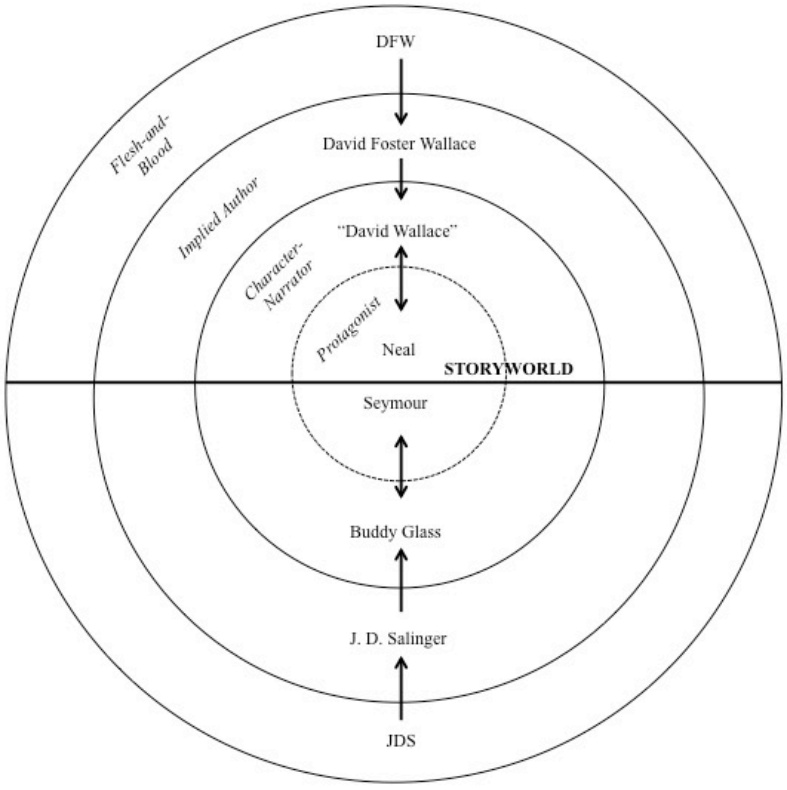
The illustrations below better represent the layered narration. The diagram below represents the ideal reader's first experience of the story, prior to the final two pages of "Good

Old Neon" and the entirety of "A Perfect Day for Bananafish."[2] There are several fictional layers, with the flesh-and-blood author shown as the largest frame, for clarity's sake.



The most notable distinction arises when comparing the previous diagram to the second below, the representation of mediated narration within the storyworld is revealed. This occurs at the end of "Good Old Neon" for Wallace, and after reading "Seymour – An Introduction" for Salinger. An additional character-narrator is revealed, opening up space between the original protagonist and the implied author. Upon continued reading, this character-narrator then serves a larger role as the previously unseen protagonist, functioning unseen until the metafictional turn.

[2] Greg Carlisle deserves acknowledgment for his use of similar framing diagrams to illustrate Wallace's use of recursion throughout *Oblivion* in his work, *Nature's Nightmare*.



These two diagrams illustrate how Wallace's text mirrors the metanarrative of Salinger's Glass family saga. While similar tropes are sure to abound, this metafictional conceit works in concert with a Salingerian hero and suggests more than blind correlation. With the next and penultimate section, I will acknowledge several explicit nods to Salinger, which, when discussed along with the assertions I've made over the previous pages, suggest that "Good Old Neon" can be effectively read as Wallace's Salinger story, in keeping with his history of intertextual engagement initiated in *Girl with Curious Hair*.

VI. Confirming "Good Old Neon" as Wallace's Salinger Text

Wallace crafts a textbook Salinger hero while employing the same metafictional conceit that Salinger uses in the deep fiction of his Glass family saga. With this heavy lifting out of the way, the scattered direct allusions to Salinger can be addressed with the weight that they now carry. Divorced from the discussion above, they could be read as cheeky or coincidental, but their significance is cemented when discussed in context with the Neal's diagnosis of banana fever and the final "David Wallace" flourish. I address several glaring references to put the cap on a Salingerian reading of Neal's story, attesting to Wallace's deliberate intertexual engagement with Salinger in "Good Old Neon."

The idea of fraudulence, and the resulting depression and suicide that necessitate the writing of the text, is central to "Good Old Neon." Neal, as imagined by "David Wallace," is unable to see anything that he does as genuine, that is, not done to manipulate how other people perceive him. He writes in a letter to his younger sister, "I was killing myself because I was an essentially fraudulent person who seemed to lack either the character or the firepower to find a way to stop even after I'd realized my fraudulence and the terrible toll that it enacted" (GON 173). He is trapped in a pit of recursive self-fraudulence, unable to see his way out, immensely isolated and alienated by his inability to connect.

About a half-century earlier, Holden Caulfield grapples with social alienation caused by fraudulence, though in this case, the fraudulence is external. The narrator, while certainly in the thick of adolescence and experiencing drastic change, does not see himself as inherently fraudulent. Instead, he spends the majority of the text reflecting on the perceived fraudulence, or "phoniness" of others, seeing the adult social world that he is growing into as dishonest and misleading to its core. Holden has to deal with the loss of the innocent world that was previously

uncomplicated by the many ways that people present themselves, symbolized in his younger brother's death.

Even though Holden spends the majority of his time focalizing these struggles externally, he acknowledges the internal implications of fraudulence in one of his final conversations with Phoebe:

> Lawyers are all right, I guess…if they go around saving innocent guys' lives all the time, but you don't *do* that kind of stuff… Even if you *did* go around saving guys' lives and all, how would you know if you did it because you really *wanted* to save guys' lives, or because you did it because what you *real*ly wanted to do was be a terrific lawyer, with everybody slapping you on the back and congratulating you in court when the goddam trial was over… How would you know you weren't being a phony? The trouble is, you *wouldn't*. (*Catcher* 172)

Holden comes around to this realization late in the novel, close to the end where is able to find some semblance of peace in the fact that these questions will not be answered. This passage marks a shift in his understanding of fraudulence, instead of an aggressive stance against almost all others around him, he acknowledges that sometimes people would be unable to tell if what they are doing is genuine or for the right motives. He begins to tiptoe into the grey area that the adult world sips its cocktails in. Neal picks up here in "Good Old Neon" with his initial confession of, and subsequent elaboration on, self-fraudulence.

However, Neal, on the penultimate page of the story, touches on a concept almost identical to the one that Holden touches on above, calling it "the paradox I used to bounce off Gustafson – is it possible to be a fraud if you aren't aware you're a fraud?" (GON 180). This question spells unique implications for Neal's fraudulence. Both character-narrators are speaking

of a problem that combines fraudulence and self-awareness; could someone lack the self-awareness to be blind to their own motivations for acting the way that they do? The biggest distinction between the two is the example that they use to set up this question. Holden uses a lawyer as his example for this problem of self-awareness, someone external that he commonly sees as a "phony" or Joe-Yale type. Neal, however, is addressing Gustafson, his psychoanalyst. While Gustafson is present during all of their interactions, Neal is more interacting with himself when at their sessions; he admitted to jerking the doctor around and manipulating him for their first dozen sessions or so, making their conversations more of an echo chamber for focusing Neal's own thoughts. Therefore, Neal is asking this question of himself, another example of falling into the infinite regress of consciousness that opens up when he focuses on his own motivations. His struggle to find balance in the face of banana fever, illustrated by his interminable list of attempted cures, fractures his consciousness and motivations. He ultimately succumbs to his "perfect day," driving his car into an abutment.

The inverse treatment of fraudulence acts as Wallace's clinamen of Salinger; he takes Salinger's assertion and swerves away from the initial conclusion, while at the same time paying due deference to a variety of other motifs in his precursor's work. Both "Good Old Neon" and *The Catcher in the Rye* feature a narrator telling a story with psychoanalysis at its core, surrounding the protagonist's struggles with mental health, dealing with issues of depression and suicide. More concretely, though, both characters have a younger sister. Neal has "Fern" who is "one of the funniest people on earth, with a very dry, subtle sense of humor," "self-sufficient" with "reddish hair" (GON 150, 153). Meanwhile, Holden describes his younger sister, Phoebe: "You never saw a little kid so pretty and smart in your whole life….She has this sort of red hair" (*Catcher* 67). Additionally, both protagonists write their respective red-headed little sister a letter

to explain why they are leaving, Neal's significantly more grave than Holden's. Phoebe gets a note at her school about how her brother will "probably hitch hike out west this afternoon," while Neal writes a note explaining his suicide to Fern (*Catcher* 200). Both characters are most concerned with the well being of their sister, but this image appears even more emphatically, on the wall of his psychoanalyst's office.

Neal describes a "framed print" on Dr. Gustafson's wall of "that Wyeth one of the little girl in the wheat field crawling uphill toward the farmhouse" (GON 146). This appears to be an explicit reference to Holden's dream, to be "the catcher in the rye," protecting "all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all" (*Catcher* 173). The print, in keeping with Holden's realization that he must let Phoebe grow up and risk falling in order to grow, shows an image of a fallen child in a field of what very well could be rye, bereft of anyone to help. Wallace seems to be all but demanding that the reader address the Salingerian imagery in his short story.

VII. Conclusions

The national landscape for these two characters plays a large part in how these two treat fraudulence differently. Salinger was writing in a post-WWII America, making sense of devastation on a scale unseen while enjoying economic prosperity in the wake of the Great Depression. While the nation lost scores of young men at war, a war that Salinger saw with his own eyes while in the drafting process for *Catcher*, the nation itself, save the attack on Pearl Harbor, was not forced to weather much physical damage. Instead, production thrived as a generation of baby boomers was brought into the country. Politically, the nation was able to frame itself in distinction to an "other," and this strategy is reflected in how Holden deals with fraudulence. It is he versus the "other," whoever that "other" may be in the world of phoniness. The war promoted a galvanizing of the nation, drawing together an image of the USA as separate and above the powers of the East and Europe.

In the midst of Salinger's publishing blackout, Wallace was writing in the thick of the nineties, a similar time of prosperity, but not in manufacturing. His boom era leaned upon a bubble that few saw coming, spurred onward by the phony yuppies alluded to in "Girl with Curious Hair." Blank fiction writers like Ellis responded to the climate in one way, while Wallace defined himself against that coarseness, in search of humanity among anomie and confusion. Further exacerbated by military conflicts in the Middle East as well as the attacks of September 11th, 2001, the country grew more fragmented in an increasingly complex world. Many of these complications found their way into art, spinning in myriad directions from the events of the time.

Wallace suggested in a 1990 essay the new rebel of the literary world will be a kind of "*anti*-rebel," who will "treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U. S. life with

reverence and conviction… eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue… risk accusations of sentimentality" ("Unibus" 81). Wallace's fiction is not Barth's or Ellis', instead one willing to risk some of these accusations, if the critic sees through the postmodernist mechanisms that can sometimes mask this sensibility. Nell Zink, in a feature for the New Yorker, ties Salinger and Wallace at the hip, dismissing whole swaths of American fiction as "Salinger-damaged postmodern crap," and criticizing the "adolescent wonder-child gestalt that oozes off every page" of *Infinite Jest* ("Outside"). Regardless of whether or not these criticisms hit the nail on the head, Wallace's empathetic goals and ability to attract droves of fans who build up their own personal "DFW" speaks volumes about both authors' ability to ingratiate themselves upon their readers.

In a 1993 interview, Wallace mentions that he sees

> our generation as the inheritors of the Sixties, which abandoned a lot of conventional techniques in favor of black humor and a new emphasis on irony… [Sixties art] performs a really useful function by getting rid of a lot of platitudes and myths in America which were no longer serviceable, but it also hasn't left anything to rebuild with besides this ethos of jaded irony and self-aware nihilism and acquisitivism. ("Garde" 17)

While Salinger's fiction, especially in his later publications, began to tread on techniques of postmodernism, his lasting impact on readers to this day reside in the humanity of his characters. While Holden could be easily derided and disliked by readers, Salinger also allowed himself to write a character who could be perceived as banal or trite, allowing himself to make a character who struggled with the innocuous details of daily life.

Wallace manages to address many of the same concerns in American life, encapsulated with the diagnosis of banana fever. His postmodernist tactics in "Good Old Neon" allow the

authorial lens to be personified through “David Wallace,” acknowledging the constructed nature of the text in order to bring the reader close to the act of creating the text, and why someone is compelled to make stories in the first place. Concerns of fraudulence are addressed, confirming that we cannot know what leads someone to suicide for certain, but that the communal act of therapy by crafting a narrative can help those of us still alive and grappling with the struggles that Weigand identifies.

In the same interview, he states that “all good writing somehow addresses the concern of and acts as an anodyne against loneliness” (“Garde” 16). The act of writing itself is an attempt at communication, and bearing that to the reader serves to affirm attempts at truth without needing to be correct. “Good Old Neon” posits a Salinger hero addressing self-fraudulence framed by a shared metafictional conceit to address authenticity at the turn of the century in American fiction. Wallace’s short story should be read in terms of Salinger, one American literary giant reaching out a hand to another’s silence: “not another word.”

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